DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 042 375 FL 001 400

AUTHOR Walker, Claire
TITLE Do Our Students Speak?
INSTITUTION American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages.
PUB DATE 63
NOTE 7p.
JOURNAL CIT Slavic and East European Journal; v7 n2 p172-178 1963

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS College Curriculum, *College Language Programs, College Students, Educational Objectives, Instructional Materials, *Language Instruction, Language Skills, Modern Languages, *Motivation, Reading Materials, *Reading Material Selection, *Russian, Secondary Schools, Slavic Languages, Speaking, Speech Skills, Student Interests, Student Motivation, Vocabulary

ABSTRACT

The author ranks speaking as the first priority and major educational objective in the study of Russian. It is felt that inadequate training in the oral skills in high school leads to an increased mortality rate in college programs. To combat this, general remarks on teaching techniques which would encourage students to continue their study of the language are offered. Particularly criticized are instructional reading materials which discourage students because of their linguistic complexity. To alleviate this problem, it is suggested that geography and grammar be studied in favor of literature. (RL)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

ED042375

FL 001 400

POOR ORIGINAL COPY - BEST AVA"

© "PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY The Slavic and East European Journal TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

POOR ORIGINAL COPY - BEST AVAILABLE AT TIME FILMED

Do Our Students Speak?

By Claire Walker
Friends School, Baltimore

College teachers of Russian who receive into their second-year classes the unevenly trained products of high school courses, have a problem. No one will question this, least of all the high school teachers, who intimately know the deficiencies of time, character, and circumstances from which their graduates have suffered. Furthermore, the problem stands to be compounded in the next few years by a growing disparity among high school products. Some high schools will make the decision to concentrate their inadequate time on speaking and hearing at the cost of reading and writing, and others will make the reverse choice. Thus, colleges will receive students with more strengths and weaknesses at both ends of the skill spectrum.

The fact remains, unfortunately, that when the high school language pattern becomes a long enough sequence to obviate the necessity of this disastrous choice, several years will have gone by, and they may be fateful. For the establishment of Russian in the high school curriculum of tomorrow, and hence the college and elementary school curriculum of the day after tomorrow, colleges hold the key today. Either the small and enthusiastic beginnings already made will become substantial and send out new roots to make interest in learning Russian commensurate with its importance, or the project will vacillate between languishing and fainting for the next decade.

The last two or three years have brought out a number of comments, apt to be disparaging, on high school preparation in Russian as it looks to college teachers who have begun to have these products in their classes. In the spirit which all of us, working on any level in the field of Russian, can share, let us look on the other side of the coin, as well, and consider college courses from the viewpoint of the high school teacher.

Many high schools follow up their graduates in their early years

FROM: *SEEJ*, Vol. VII, No. 2 (1963)

of college, and the graduates often go back and talk to their high school teachers. At the present time there are many of us who have so frequently heard from returning students the same comment on their college Russian courses, that we are beginning to feel seriously disturbed.

"We never talk Russian in our college class," the student will say, and add apologetically: "I feel as if I'm losing ground. I can't even talk as freely now as I could when I left high school."

The next comment from the same student a semester or so later is one that I have learned to predict: "I've decided to drop Russian after this year. All I ever do is look up words in the dictionary."

If these comments were from our poor students, we would know they were not really applying themselves in college any more effectively than they did in high school. But the fact that the best students come back dispirited with such comments worries us. Many a time have I heard teachers of Russian say that a 20%-33% survival of those who embark on the study of Russian is as much as can be expected. But students in advanced college courses who have done well in two or three years in high school, have already survived. Their presence in the courses is evidence of their serious interest and resolution—the loss of any of them is the loss of a considerable investment of time and effort in a cause which needs more of both. Too many students who have progressed two or three years into a five-year job are dropping out of Russian at the college level.

Assessing blame for the hitches in our joint enterprise seems as pointless as it is inconclusive. On the other hand, Dr. Edgerton's proposed requirement of fluency in a foreign language for entrance into college, while sound enough, is certainly far in the future. While we are waiting for this to come about, incoming students will seem increasingly ragged in their previous training. Colleges will be taxed to find the alternative to discouraging or boring students out of their courses. There are, however, just two simple proposals which I believe would give colleges the key to the situation and which would save our good high school students with Russian preparation:

I. Let the college staff give first priority to the language objective of moving *each* student from wherever he is further along toward spoken proficiency, and let *no other objective* take precedence over this.

II. In the area of reading for undergraduates, let some consideration be given to course content other than literature.

I. Increased speaking proficiency

There are other reasons besides theoretical linguistic soundness for increasing speaking proficiency. Nothing can compete with the ability to understand and be understood for making language alive, satisfying, and even exciting. As Dr. Edgerton says in the article already cited (*SEEJ*, VI (1962), p. 366): "It has been my observa-

tion that real progress in learning to speak a foreign language creates its own justification and almost automatically leads to a desire to learn more." The key words here are *real progress*. This does not mean memorizing and reciting dialogs—though this is a beginning. It does not mean repeating taped utterances—though this is also a beginning. It does not mean singing songs or reading parts in plays or rendering selections of beautiful literature—though these are all good variations and enrich the basic process.

Real progress in learning to speak Russian means active participation in the give-and-take of a live, spontaneous exchange. When the pupil hears, understands, and replies; is understood, and in turn can understand the reply; then makes a further reply of his own, thus continuing the exchange—that is real progress, and nothing short of that can be so designated. When the learner can sustain a give-and-take for five or ten speeches on each side, then the promise of a less laborious fluency to come is so bright and so warming that as long as he can sense any continuity of movement in the same direction, the enticement holds.

Above all, the continuity should not be broken. A period of successive classes in English, or even speaking in Russian but by the teacher only, can be fatal. At the same time basic dialogs, so helpful in the early stages, can also become fatal. As one of my former students wrote: "there comes a time when one is saturated with essential phrases."

Then what are some techniques that might bring the gratifying results? Here are three that might be used with various adaptations.

1. The most skillful teachers I have observed in the use of basic dialogs have developed their own knacks of leading students on to use the essential phrases they memorized in new and spontaneous contexts. One teacher, after hearing the day's dialog accurately repeated several times, introduced a topic in some variation from the subject, and called upon students to comment.

For an example, suppose dialogs had been learned on successive days around a visit to a department store to buy clothes, a visit to the library to borrow a book, and an inquiry of a policeman about route. The surprise topic, to which students would look forward with curiosity and anticipation, wondering if they would see how to apply the familiar phrases and to deal with the inflection correctly, would be announced in about the last twenty minutes of the class time. In this case it might be an account of buying a book in a department store. The student who managed to set out, arrive, make clear his intention, and depart with the book in hand scored a success which was obviously satisfying. And the student who could do these things and also get lost in the store but inquire the way of the salesperson in the blouse department—received the accolade of class and teacher alike.

2. Oral reports that have been prepared in advance and are given in class can be used advantageously if two hazards can be

avoided. One of these is undue anxiety. If the student knows he will be corrected on every word he tries to utter, he will be convinced that either he or the teacher is hopeless, and that he will never get anywhere. Or if the student is being marked on his report, he may worry about his mark more than his mastery. Quoting again from a student's report on Russian in college: "Oral reports were fraught with a high degree of anxiety because they were graded on correctness of syntax; this resulted in aggregations of words and phrases of maximum simplicity, with a very low ingredient of experimentation."

The other hazard in oral reports is the same as in translations in class from books in which students have written in the English meanings between the lines. The latter results in dependence on the write-ins, with little learning taking place. Similarly, word-by-word memorization of a report results only in learning *pro tem*. One effective teacher always made a point of asking each student two or three quick questions after his report had been heard, using words which appeared in the report. In order to answer these, the student had to know more about the words he had used than the exact forms he had used.

3. Induced discussion is time-consuming, nerve-wracking to the native speaker, slow and uninspiring. But if used day after day over a long time, and kept alive in every imaginative way any individual teacher can devise, it will gradually build competence and confidence. Discussion can be limited to some part of the class time. Students A, B and C can be named to talk over some item of current study—as they choose. A stop watch can actually be held, and the students challenged to see if they can maintain the conversation for five minutes, or ten minutes. Talking teams can be set up, to relay a discussion from one to another, or to see which team can hold out the longest, or which can carry on the conversation most interesting to the rest of the class.

A variation consists of the use of an undisclosed list of some ten "words of the day." These can be chosen by the teacher from words that have been getting attention in the class. If the discussants know that they or their teams will receive a point for each correct use of a word of the day, they will experiment a little more boldly, and since this is at the time a game of chance, they can feel free to have some fun while experimenting. The winner of a talking contest might well receive a prize. This should not be an "A," but preferably something silly and ceremonious. The latest newspaper, a cartoon out of *Pravda*, a card on which is written a proverb, a *značok*, a page off an *otryvnoj* calendar—these make good prizes, even cherished ones.

These are not all the ways of creating situations in which oral competence has a chance to grow. But they all work. Granted, they take time, and there is not much time. But what can have a prior

claim to whatever time there is?—Is it more constructive to rush over large quantities of content for the sake of covering it, than to lay sound foundations of genuine skill?

The importance of oral progress for every student in every year of his college Russian exceeds that of any other objective. Even when the goal is reading, continued oral progress is the best guarantee of rapid expansion of vocabulary and comprehension. Many students of Russian love the literature which their college courses open to them. The literature is a bumpy road to travel, though, and blandishments along the way are needed. Reading and writing must not be neglected, or the student becomes as illiterate in the new language as many native speakers are in their own languages. The intention is emphatically *not* to hinder the development of writing and reading. But these processes should not be decoding and encoding operations. They should keep pace with the oral work, and students should be able to write what they can say. The trouble in many existing courses is that they cannot *say* what they can read, write, or understand. While this is no crime of which teachers have been guilty with evil intent, it is a great misfortune for the students.

One spring one of my students came back to see me with the familiar: "I think I have to drop Russian. Can't fit it into my schedule."

I mourned openly and feelingly. For this was one of the finest students I have ever had.

But the next Christmas he came back with a delighted grin. "I wanted to tell you right away that I've just decided to major in Russian."

The reason?—a new instructor and a new approach in his college course. "Last year our teacher couldn't stand hearing us talk. I couldn't even get out a whole sentence without his correcting every word. And at that it was easier for me than for anyone else in the class. But the new man says we have to get some facility to say anything before we can start improving on it. He makes us talk, and we're all getting better. It's wonderful!"

I think I may not be alone in regarding conversation as more valuable than coverage. Course content is something to supply a medium for communication beyond the amenities and trivia of the "essential phrases." That content should become a substitute for communication is an unhappy irony. Yet it happens. There is nothing for boosting the morale of all of us non-native learners that compares with the good-natured patience of a native speaker, especially when he can authoritatively brush aside our errors as less significant than our achievements. Furthermore, I have been struck by the fervor and unanimity with which students have reported another observation. This is from college classes where much work actually is done on oral proficiency. —"We all talk in every class period. The amazing thing is, that from the speaking we do, the whole class has made unbelievable progress in comprehension."—Another student report, and this student will probably not drop out of Russian.

II. Course content other than literature

This brings me to my other recommendation, which is second in every way to the first, but perhaps worth some attention.

That teachers can teach best in the area of their enthusiasm is a rather specious old saw., The most eminent scholars often make sorry teachers, while on the other hand, individuals who keep working and growing themselves are apt to be among the best teachers. For several reasons I deplore the almost exclusive orientation of college courses around literature; in spite of the well-known love of Russian personnel for the literary treasures, they are very hard to use.

Typically the first two years are the introduction to the language (really a five-year job at the standard course rate), and then literature courses follow. Usually these are nineteenth century literature with a modest admixture of early twentieth century and Soviet writing. Suffice it to state that not all students who want to learn Russian are especially interested in the literature, any more than they are in the English classics. Many of them are very anxious to be able to communicate in the Russian being used right now, on subjects of concern right now.

But the really crucial fact of the matter is that students who will enjoy the literature eventually are not ready for it in their third year. They are ready and anxious to read, but if plunged into novels, stories and poems with their involved structures, and rapidly shifting vocabulary, students soon get lost. Sometimes it seems as if native speakers have no conception of the multiplicity of the vocabulary used in the most casual story or the shortest poem, or of the magnitude of the comprehension problem posed by a printed page which has to be looked at with the most minute scrutiny in order to be grasped. A student who can read 40 or 50 pages of English in an hour, or skim a whole book in one to two hours, is apt to be unusual if he can read as fast as 10 pages of Russian in an hour. Many students complain that they have trouble really following five in an hour.

Largely the problem is the number of new words that accumulate in a few pages of unselective reading. Puškin's *Mozart and Salieri*, for example, is a short work of some 240 lines. In the first 350 words are contained at least 75 that would give pause to a reasonably well-trained third year student in high school, and possibly in college, depending on what the college approach has been. It is not especially enjoyable to read anything in which every fifth word has to be looked up in a dictionary. Worse, it is not conducive to a feeling of progress to go through the effort to read constantly in this way. The new words come too fast; they cannot possibly be assimilated. Furthermore, they do not repeat soon enough or often enough to impress themselves.

A film strip on an author, or on some phase of life in the Soviet Union, or narrating some short story, similarly loses its impact as

a visual delight in spite of attractive illustrations. A strip containing 60 to 80 frames can easily run to 450 unfamiliar words in the printed inscriptions on the frames. Without careful preparation such a film strip is lacking in availability in any real sense.

It now appears that the 1000 to 2000-word basic vocabularies which are commonly accepted as reasonable in size actually represent a considerably larger number of items that have to be learned. This would certainly be true in Russian. Because of the wealth of inflection and structural patterning, to know well the 1500 words which the Russian Committee of the National Association of Independent Schools recommends actually involves knowing at least three times as many "lexical units." The beginner's supply of words even then does not approach adequacy for reading. In a recent study of language testing Robert Lado *(Language Testing*, Gr. Br., 1961, p. 181 ff.) accepts an estimate that reading or recognition vocabulary even at the first-grade level may be as much as 17,000 words, and may by the end of high school grow to 50,000 words and more. For an English speaker language learning techniques based on analogy do not function as early or as readily for Russian as for languages that are closer to English. Consequently, the reading problem in Russian needs a more wary approach. The same learner who in the second or third year of study can walk through French or Spanish literature with a cane cannot cope with Russian literature except in a wheel chair.

This is the reason I want to argue that reading experiences in content courses like geography, history or grammar should receive consideration by college instructors, as an alternative to the study of Russian language entirely through literature. The narrower content field offers a more selective vocabulary. The words are repeated often enough so that students can assimilate them more naturally. Then students can have the satisfaction of actually hearing themselves function in the language while they are still acquiring the structural and lexical facility that takes time to build, but is fundamental to any real enjoyment of literature with its unselective and utterly staggering vocabulary.

At the risk of repeating, I should like to add one more thing. The "covering" of a given quantity of subject matter is not a plan with intrinsic value. The courses many teachers remember having taken—and which they still take—in colleges are admittedly the same patterns that those teachers now follow. Even a poor course, provided its student survives, seems to have a certain self-perpetuating power. But today's young students are not the same as yesterday's. Today's generation has lived for so many years under a degree of academic pressure which we of the older generation never felt, that the old crush-and-grind approach to a foreign language just does not speak to their condition. If we would be successful in establishing our field in adequate volume, we must develop the art of steeping our students in Russian without stifling them.